

U.S. House gives boost to Cuban democracy

The House approved a big jump in Cuba aid money as well as more funds for U.S. broadcasts to Venezuela. But lawmakers proposed cuts in military aid to Colombia.

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Key spending proposals

Key Latin American provisions in the House 2008 Department of State foreign operations spending bill:

- **Cuba:** Provides \$46 million for Cuban opposition groups. Eliminates U.S. funding for the U.N. Human Rights Council, which opponents say targets Israel but not Cuba, Sudan and other rights abusers.
- **Colombia:** Cuts overall aid to Colombia by \$60 million; slashes military and police assistance by \$160 million but adds \$101 million in economic and social aid.
- **Venezuela:** Would provide \$10 million to fund more Voice of America broadcasts to offset the influence of President Hugo Chávez.

WASHINGTON --

In the first vote on Cuba legislation under a Democrat controlled Congress, the House on Thursday easily approved a big increase in money for U.S. programs that support dissidents on the island.

The House also approved a proposal that would provide Voice of America with \$10 million to bolster its broadcasts to Venezuela, where news media freedoms have been seen as under attack by left-wing President Hugo Chávez.

And the House was expected to pass late Thursday a proposal to make big cuts in military aid to Colombia -- in the most significant change to the \$5 billion U.S. anti-drug-trafficking program Plan Colombia since its inception in 2000. However, Republicans critical of the proposal agreed to let the bill pass while planning to challenge it later during House-Senate negotiations.

The \$34 billion State Department foreign aid bill for 2008 provided several avenues for Democrats to challenge some of President Bush's policies on Colombia and Cuba, with the administration and its backers scoring a victory on Cuba.

Bush requested almost \$46 million for Cuba democracy programs for the 2008 fiscal year, a fivefold jump from the 2007 level, in keeping with a recommendation by an interagency commission that said the money would help bring democracy to the island.

Democrats on an appropriations panel -- chaired by Rep. Nita Lowey of New York -- that oversees State Department foreign aid bills had cut the aid level to \$9 million, arguing there was not enough oversight to ensure the money would be well spent.

An amendment proposed by Cuban-American Reps. Lincoln Díaz-Balart, a Miami Republican, and Albio Sires, a New Jersey Democrat, to adopt the original Bush funding request passed by a 254-170 vote, with 66 Democrats joining 188 Republicans in support.

The Cuba bill still requires Senate approval. But the vote "significantly strengthened" Bush's efforts to get more money for the Cuba programs, Díaz-Balart's office said in a statement.

PROS AND CONS

Thursday's floor debate turned passionate at times. While some lawmakers questioned the Cuba democracy programs' effectiveness, supporters argued that leader Fidel Castro's illness and the possible impending transition in Cuba meant the opposition on the island needed more support.

Each side cited passages from a November General Accountability Office report on the Cuba programs. The report said there were management and oversight problems and some instances of abuses, such as the purchase of Godiva chocolates and cashmere sweaters. But it also noted that dissidents were receiving radios, literature, medicine and other needed aid.

Díaz-Balart said the GAO report never recommended any cuts, and the U.S. Agency for International Development had incorporated all the GAO recommendations to improve program oversight.

He told members he had a letter from prominent Cuban dissidents in support of the programs and said similar programs helped the Eastern European opposition against the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

"Let us not turn our backs on the Cuban internal opposition," Díaz-Balart said. "They will play a key role in the inevitable democratic transition that is approaching."

FREEDOM OF PRESS

On Venezuela, the House backed a proposal by Florida Republican Rep. Connie Mack that would provide \$10 million for the Voice of America to boost its broadcasts to Venezuela.

"Freedom of the press died in Venezuela on May 27, 2007, when Chávez shut down Radio Caracas Television," Mack said on the House floor -- referring to RCTV, an opposition TV station that was denied its broadcast license, triggering international condemnation.

The initiative must still clear the Senate, but Democrats have given indications they are in no mood to go easy on the Venezuelan leader.

At a hearing Tuesday, Rep. Tom Lantos, D-Calif., the influential chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, condemned the Venezuelan leader for visiting "the most reprehensible despots in the world" in North Korea, Iran and Cuba and moving toward "his own brand of authoritarianism."

On Colombia, the House was set to approve late Thursday an overall \$60 million reduction in Plan Colombia, including a sharp \$160 million cut in military aid, but adding \$101 million in economic and social assistance. Democrats argued a new approach was needed as cocaine production appeared to hold steady despite an expensive U.S.-led effort to fumigate and eradicate coca crops.